

Rites of Spring



written by Judy Darnell

Milton Hardcastle made a disdainful face as he approached the poolside table where Lt. Frank Harper sat waiting. McCormick had joined Harper, which he supposed was to be expected; the kid would use any excuse to get out of work. Unfortunately, his aroma had joined them also, and after having spent the morning spreading fertilizer, it left a lot to be desired.

"For God's sake, McCormick, either go take a bath or sit downwind," growled Hardcastle, passing a cup of coffee to Harper.

"I *am* downwind," McCormick returned. "You don't believe it, go stand behind me."

"He's telling the truth, Milt," affirmed Harper. "Why do you think I moved to this side of the table?"

"Downwind, upwind, doesn't matter. You stink." Hardcastle tried ineffectively to wave off McCormick's air with his hands. "Go away."

"Go away?! I like that! Here I am working my fingers to the bone just so you can have a stupid English garden 'cause you liked a picture you saw in a magazine, and you tell me to go away 'cause I stink."

"Are you through?" Hardcastle smiled.

"Yes."

"Good. Now, GO AWAY!"

"Fellas," interrupted Harper, "far be it from me to jump into these family squabbles, especially on a subject I know *so much* about: English gardens..." He paused long enough to give Hardcastle a what-are-you-gonna-come-up-with-next look. "...but all I need you to do is sign these couple of papers that'll wrap everything up on the Conroy case. That's all I need. Then you can get back to your...garden."

"I saw that snicker, Frank."

"Snicker? Would I snicker? Mark, did you see me snicker?"

"No, but feel free to go ahead," McCormick replied. "Lord knows I have."

"That's enough out of both of you," warned Hardcastle, affecting an injured air. "It's not my fault that neither of you know how to appreciate the finer things in life."

"Huh!" grunted McCormick. "Don't see you out there helpin' me spread those fifty-pound bags of 'finer things'."

"I'm gonna spread *you* if you don't get outta here and stop polluting my patio. Now git!"

"Will ya give me a chance to sign Frank's papers? I even washed my hands first. See?" He waved a clean hand in the judge's face, laughing as Hardcastle batted it away. "Where do I sign, Frank?" McCormick asked, turning to the friendly lieutenant. "Better do it fast and make my getaway before the Lone Ranger here decides to plant Tonto among the petunias."

Hardcastle suppressed a grin as he watched the aromatic ex-con skim quickly through the paperwork. With those brown curls blowing around his face and those cornflower blue eyes, McCormick *looked* like something expected to be found in the middle of an English garden. Not that he'd ever admit something like that to the kid, of course...too conceited about his looks as it was.

"Okay." McCormick shoved the papers in Hardcastle's direction. "The serf has signed. Now, if Lord Hardcastle wants to make his mark, I'll go resume my slave labor."

"You're not a slave, McCormick," said Hardcastle, giving his automatic response to McCormick's chronic complaint. He winked at Harper, then added, "Serf sounds good, though. I like that."

"You would," McCormick snorted as he left to continue his chores.

Hardcastle magnanimously ignored the snort. Given McCormick's penchant for running off at the mouth, today's complaints had been mild, and besides, he was in the mood to be generous.

"Here ya go, Frank." He handed the completed paperwork to Harper with a satisfied smile. "Signed, sealed and delivered."

"You're looking mighty pleased with yourself today, Milt. Something up? Don't tell me you've started sticking your nose into another case already."

Hardcastle stretched, enjoying the feel of the sun's warmth as he looked over at Harper's smiling but puzzled face. "I'm not...sticking my nose' as you put it...into anything. I just wanna sit back and relax, take life easy."

"That'll be the day," said Harper in a skeptical tone.

"You'll see," Hardcastle said, then stretched leisurely. "Just gonna kick up my feet and do nothing for at least a couple of weeks. Blame it on spring fever."

"Uh-huh. Okay, *Lord* Hardcastle, just don't forget to feed and water your serf once in a while."

"Serf', my hind leg. That walking stomach's gonna eat me outta house and home."

"I hear ya," laughed Harper as he rose to leave. "Mark did real good on the Conroy case, though, Milt. I've gotta admit this whole arrangement of yours has worked out a lot better than I ever expected."

"He did all right," Hardcastle acknowledged, ignoring the second part of Harper's statement.

"Come on, Milt..."

"Okay, okay. He did good."

"That's better." Harper laughed aloud at Hardcastle's put upon expression. "Sorry, Milt, just can't help trying to drag the words out of you sometimes. I know how much you like that kid even if you do have him over there slopping around in a pile of manure."

"It's fertilizer!" Hardcastle corrected, scowling at Harper. "Gotta

keep him busy doing something, else he'd just lay around on his butt all day listening to that godawful crap on his stereo."

"Whatever. Enjoy your 'relaxation', Milt. Bet I could get some good odds on how long it's gonna last."

"Don't bother, Frank." Hardcastle grinned as he leaned back in his chair. "'Cause for once I mean it. Not gonna do a thing but drink beer and watch ball games."

"We'll see," said Harper knowingly. "Later, Milt."

"Yeah, much later." Hardcastle smiled, watching Harper shake his head as he left. Even though he couldn't see his face, he knew the lieutenant was probably grinning a mile wide and thinking 'no way'. Well, Frank'd be in for a surprise then, because Milton C. Hardcastle meant *exactly* what he said.

Maybe it is some kinda spring fever, but by damn, the kid and I do deserve a break. Been workin' our tails off for months now on one thing or another. Get this garden planted, then let McCormick flake out, too. Shouldn't have any problem with that; it's his natural state. 'Serf'! Hardcastle chuckled at the choice of word. Damn crazy kid. Could always make him laugh, though he still tried to hide it most of the time. Ah, what the hell. McCormick was a good kid, and Frank had been more on target than he knew. Mark did mean a lot to him...and it worked both ways; a fact that had taken him a long time to realize. Yep, things had worked out better than anyone could ever have expected; time to just sit back and enjoy the peace and quiet for a while.

It was, after all, spring. The air was clear, the sun was warm, and for the moment at least, all was right with the world. What could possibly go wrong in a season so full of promise as this one?

Maria Corazon was careful to keep several cars between her '69 Ford Mustang and the GMC pickup she was following. After waiting all morning in the beaches' public parking area, her eyes glued to the highway, she wasn't about to let those two bastards out of her sight.

Screw the police, and the upcoming judge and jury; it was *these* two who had laid the trap that caught Max. Caught him right in the act of receiving the coke shipment. Goddamn them! Now she would never become Mrs. Max Conroy, and it was all their fault.

She gripped the steering wheel tightly, feeling her nails dig into her palms. She hadn't felt this uptight in almost a year, not since those first few weeks after she was released from Camarillo. She'd been scared then, though no one would have known it to look at her. Maria Corazon shows her fear to no one, she thought proudly, tightening her lips into a thin line. But she'd been scared all right. Her record was minor, a little hooking, some shoplifting, but the world didn't exactly open up its arms to former mental patients.

Then Max Conroy had stepped into her life. Make that whirled in, and life had been one big party from that day on. Oh, he was something else, that Max. Too smart to ever touch the drugs he dealt in; he'd made sure she stayed away from them, too. "You don't need 'em, babe," he'd laughed. "You're spaced out by nature." Okay, so maybe she was, what of it? They'd had a good time, a damn fine time, and she wanted, had planned on, a lifetime of it. Max had laughed and changed the subject when she talked about getting married, but he hadn't said no, had he? Hadn't sent her away, told her to get lost like they usually did. No, given enough

time he would've married her. She was sure of it.

But those two bastards up there in the truck had put an end to it all. Max had mentioned the judge before. Hardcastle. The name had clicked as soon as she read it in the paper. He'd tried to put Max away when he was still on the bench, but he'd failed. They always failed, Max always being one step ahead of them. Until now. He'd walked into their setup as neatly as an unwary fly caught up in a spider's web. And he was just as trapped. There wouldn't be any loopholes this time, no legal technicalities. And it was all Hardcastle's fault. He was one mean old bastard; Max had said so. Probably couldn't stand it that Max had got away from him before, so he'd come after him. It was a vendetta.

Damn him for ruining her plans, wrecking her new life. If Hardcastle believed in vendettas, then by God, she'd show him exactly what that word meant. Him and that 'assistant' of his; what'd the paper called him? McCormick? Yeah, Mark McCormick. They'd both been in the phone book, no problem there. Different numbers but the same address. Might make it easier, might make it harder; too soon to tell yet. Right now she just wanted a good close look at both of them. Shoulda figured they'd live in some fancy beach estate. Couldn't see a thing from outside the drive except a huge house, a GMC pickup and some kind of red sports car.

She'd thought her eyes were going to cross, waiting for one of them to drive by the public parking where she had waited. The sports car would've been easy, but goddamn, it seemed like half of Malibu was driving pickup trucks. She'd nearly pulled out after the wrong one three times. But she hadn't been wrong this last time. *This* was the truck she'd seen in the driveway. And if they'd ever stop, she'd get a good look at *both* of them.

Wait a minute, they were slowing down, turning. Maria smiled tightly as she flicked her turn signal. They were parking at *Donovan's Feed & Seed*; it was perfect. She could follow inside in a moment, just another customer browsing through the shrubs and flowers. Then she'd get a nice *long* look at the two men who had taken her Max away.

"Oh, Hardcastle," she murmured, parking the car, then checking her appearance in the rearview mirror. "You...and your assistant, too, 'cause he's just as guilty...you're going to regret screwing up my life like this. I don't know how I'm going to do it yet, but oh, by God, you *are* going to regret it."

McCormick stifled a yawn as the judge made his way through the various rows of shrubbery. This was even more boring than the time Hardcastle had let himself get suckered into judging that stupid 'Miss Sixteen' beauty contest. At least then he'd been able to look at legs; twigs and branches, however, just didn't have the same appeal. Christ, Hardcase could come up with the craziest ideas sometimes. There was already enough greenery at Gull's-Way to qualify it as a small forest, but did that matter to the judge? No! *He* wanted an English garden like the one in the picture.

McCormick shook his head indulgently at the older man's back. Hardcastle was just like an over-age kid when he got his mind set on something. Might as well try to change the course of a river. Have about as much luck with one as with the other.

"McCormick." The judge tugged his arm. "Would you come outta your coma and help me pick out some of this stuff?"

"Yeah, okay. Whaddaya want me to pick out?"

"I don't know. What looks good?"

"Judge, ... *none* of it looks good to the guy who's gonna have to take care of it."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I'm killin' you with overwork. What about... those things?" Hardcastle pointed vaguely to some flowering pink bushes.

McCormick shrugged. "Yeah, they're okay. What are they?"

"I don't know," Hardcastle growled under his breath. "And will you keep it down?"

He cast the judge a quizzical look, leaned directly into his ear as if to whisper, and asked loudly, "Why?"

Hardcastle brushed at his ear as McCormick, grinning, jumped out of his reach.

"Judge, you don't have any idea what goes in an English garden, do you?" he asked, hard pressed not to laugh.

"Sure, I do." Hardcastle pointed toward an undistinguished looking shrub. "Lots of green plants. And flowers, and stuff like that."

"Hardcase, you're too much. You saw that picture in the magazine, and you've got *that* picture in your head, but you don't have the slightest idea of what any of the plants were. You wouldn't know a pansy from a begonia." McCormick beamed at his discovery, unable to keep his laughter from surfacing any longer.

"I figured I'd recognize 'em, McCormick!!"

"Shhh!" He placed a finger over his lips as he tried to stifle his giggles.

"You're gettin' a real kick outta this, aren't you, kiddo?"

"No, Judge," McCormick replied, his head nodding affirmatively even as he replied negatively.

"Oughta move you outta the gatehouse and into the gardener's trailer," snarled Hardcastle threateningly, "since you *are* going to be the gardener."

"Unh-uh, Hardcase. Even you wouldn't be that mean. Nobody's stepped foot in that dump in over two years."

"Might be good for you to rough it a bit. You're gettin' too comfortable and sure of yourself."

"Forget it. Way that old trailer's set back in those trees, it's probably full of bats, rats, and roaches. You're just pissed 'cause you don't know what to pick out for your garden."

Hardcastle grunted in reply, turned and walked further down the row of shrubbery. McCormick followed. The silence lengthened, and McCormick, looking at Hardcastle's granite features, grew worried. "I mean...you are kiddin'...aren't you? You wouldn't really make me move out of the gatehouse?"

Hardcastle threw him a disgusted look. "Of course, I'm not gonna make you move outta the gatehouse. C'mon, hotshot, you oughta know by now when to take me serious and when not to."

McCormick shook his head, giving a sigh of relief. "I didn't *really* think you meant it. You just looked so fierce for a minute there, I wasn't quite sure."

Hardcastle grinned. "Just keepin' in practice, kiddo." He turned McCormick around, giving him a slight shove in the back. "Go find somebody to help us out here. Except for peat moss, I don't know what'n hell we need."

"Now you're cookin'." McCormick grinned, then darted off before

Hardcastle could cuff him. Pleased with himself, he turned and almost bumped into a young woman who was looking through a row of hanging baskets. Apologizing hastily, he took off in search of a clerk.

Dark piercing eyes watched until he disappeared down another aisle.

Maria loaded her backpack carefully, doublechecking to be sure she had everything. It had taken two days to gather up all the necessary items; she didn't intend to leave anything behind.

The plan was perfect, flawless, spawned as she'd listened, unnoticed, to the judge and his friend in the nursery. An abandoned trailer set back in the woods, they'd said. Obviously, they didn't live in the same house, though she hadn't been terribly sure what a 'gatehouse' was. Still, the fact that they wouldn't be together *all* the time would make it easier.

Her instincts had been right when she'd slipped from the store and gone back to Gull's-Way to have a look around. They'd be in the store at *least* an hour arguing over their stupid plants. Plenty of time to locate that gardener's trailer. The thought of a security system and possible servants had been intimidating, but neither had turned out to be a problem. The security system wasn't even turned on, though she'd spotted the cameras immediately. Probably only bothered to turn it on at night, she reasoned. Rich bastards don't think anybody would dare mess around their house during the day. There hadn't been any servants around, either. It was almost *too* perfect, she thought; knock on wood. The only hard part had been finding the old trailer. That McCormick guy hadn't been kidding when he called it a dump. That was okay though,; made it even better in a way.

She zipped the backpack closed, her hands trembling slightly with excitement and anticipation. Laying the pack carefully on the bed...the bed she'd shared so often with Max...she walked over to the mirror. Studying the reflection, she didn't bother posing as she often did, taking pride in her still good figure and the long black hair that hadn't yet begun to grey despite her forty years. Yes, the jeans and olive drab tee shirt were perfect for the inconspicuous look she sought. She went over the plan once more in her mind.

I'll leave the car in public parking and walk with my backpack until I reach the judge's place. I'll sneak onto the grounds during the day while the security system's off, slip through the wooded part till I'm safe into the old trailer. Have to watch out for that McCormick character, can't let him spot me. Then...then I can put my plan into action. "I'll show you a vendetta, old man," she mumbled angrily to her reflection. "Which one of you will it be first, huh? Who'll get the luck of the draw?"

She frowned as her thoughts went back to Max; to the brief phone conversation that morning. His voice had brought pleasure and pain at the same time. To know he was in jail, and that soon, *too* soon, the jail would change to a prison. Hardcastle's fault, all of it, everything that was wrong. She'd promised her man revenge; he hadn't understood, telling her not to do anything stupid. That was okay, she had decided. Max was just playing it smart as usual. He knew he couldn't speak freely, no telling who might be listening. Deep down, he understood. He *had* to understand. She was doing it for him. For Max, her love.

She smiled, glad to have the thoughts straightened out in her mind. She hated getting confused, having doubts creep in. No time for doubts now, she told herself, pushing the lingering ones firmly back, forcing them away with a brutal finality. *Now*, she was ready. Ready for that old judge and

his smart aleck friend. Smiling at the thought of what lay ahead, she picked up the backpack and headed for her car.

McCormick wiped the sweat from his forehead, trying to ignore the temptation to bury Hardcastle instead of the new azalea and rhododendron bushes.

"You're diggin' that hole too deep, McCormick."

"No, I'm not."

"Looks too deep to me."

McCormick stopped digging, leaned on the shovel and glared mutely at Hardcastle.

"What?"

"Don't gimme that 'what'. Judge, you're drivin' me crazy. You wanna plant these things, fine, come do it. But stop standing over my shoulder telling *me* how to do it."

"It's *my* garden, McCormick."

"Eerrrgh," escaped gritted teeth. "Don't you have *anything* else to do but play lord of the manor? Thought you were gonna just sit back and relax today."

"I *am* relaxing," Hardcastle snapped.

"You're not relaxing, you don't know *how* to relax. You're bored out of your gourd, and you're drivin' me nuts!"

"All I'm doin' is offerin' advice, McCormick." Hardcastle pointed downward. "That hole's too deep."

McCormick smiled at a pink flowered azalea bush, knelt down, and spoke to it. "He's not listening. Mind if I talk to you? You're much prettier to look at, and *you* don't talk back."

"Very funny, smartass. Okay, so I'm not doin' any good here; you already know everything."

"He's catching on." McCormick continued to address the azalea.

"Would you stop talking to that goddamn plant while I'm standing here! Look like an idiot."

"You, me, or the plant?" McCormick grinned, looking up.

"All three of us, probably," the judge admitted. "And you're right for once in your miserable life. I *am* bored. Watching you dig holes is not the most exciting way to spend a day, ya know."

"Never said it was. Judge..." McCormick stood, shaking his head at the disgruntled older man. "...why don't you just face it. You're not cut out to be the country squire, smiling benevolently at the peasants while you sit around and watch the grass grow. Go see Frank, or Bill Giles, or some of your other old friends while I finish up here. Then tonight, maybe we can go to a ballgame or something, start figuring out what we wanna work on next."

"We're *supposed* to be relaxing," said Hardcastle obstinately.

"We've relaxed, if you can call it that, for almost a week, and you're about ready to climb walls. Gotta get you back in the harness, Hardcase, so you can rest up from all this rest."

"Ya know, you can be a real pain in the butt, kiddo."

McCormick smiled, picking up on the humorous resignation in the judge's voice.

"Especially when you're right," Hardcastle continued.

"Don't worry about it, Judge," he offered generously; "I can be a pain in the butt when I'm wrong, too."

"Oh, now, *that's* a real news flash," drawled Hardcastle, strolling off, then breaking into a smile. "I'll be back by dinner time. Think I'll go rattle Frank's cage for a while, see what he's been up to."

"Bring back a pizza?" McCormick asked, grinning and savoring his victory. He laughed as the judge walked on, muttering an unintelligible but distinctly obscene sounding reply. "Yep, you are definitely too much, Hardcase," he chuckled to himself, leaning again on the shovel as he watched Hardcastle climb into the pickup. "And *no* anchovies!" he yelled.

"You just plant those bushes and stop worrying about feeding your face!" Hardcastle yelled back.

"Yes sir!" He saluted. "*Seig Heil!*"

"Go to hell," Hardcastle laughed, starting down the drive.

"Not on an empty stomach," McCormick yelled after the exiting vehicle. Chuckling again, he reached for the pink azalea. After planting it carefully, packing the soil around its roots, McCormick stood back to look at his work. A sudden sharp click sounded directly behind him, and he froze, recognizing at once the unmistakable sound of a gun being cocked.

"Lady, are you crazy or what?" McCormick asked in confusion as he tried to figure out what was going on.

"Maybe." She smiled coldly back at him, caressing his cheek with the blue steel .38. "Guess it depends on your point of view."

McCormick absorbed the bizarre statement as he looked around the cramped quarters of the gardener's trailer.

The ominous sounding 'click' in the garden had presaged the unusual pattern of events that had followed, and now, as he sat tightly bound in a straight wooden chair, he knew instinctively the answer to the question he had asked. This woman, whoever she was...this woman with the strange hard glitter in her eyes, was not altogether sane.

"Look..." He tried a different approach. "...I don't know who you are or how you got here. And I sure as hell don't know why you'd want to do something like this."

"Maybe I enjoy it," she said, sitting down cross-legged on the floor and pulling an apple from her backpack.

"You enjoy it? Lady, I don't know you from Adam. You show up behind me with a gun, you march me down here to this trailer, and truss me up like a Christmas turkey...and you've got no reason except 'maybe you enjoy it!'"

"Never said there wasn't a reason," she replied calmly, crunching into the apple.

"Don't you think I deserve to know what that reason is?"

"No. Not yet, anyway."

McCormick stared at her, baffled. Her calm, matter-of-fact tone was adding to the eeriness of the situation rather than lessening it.

"You haven't suffered yet, you see," she added, as though that somehow explained things.

"Suffered?" He twisted his head around. "Why do I get the feelin' that I don't wanna know what you mean by that?"

"Oh, come on, Mark." She looked up at him with a feral grin. "You don't mind if I call you Mark? The game's just begun."

He pounced on the first clue she had given him, small though it was. "How'd you know my name?"

"Interrogation, Mr. McCormick? You're hardly in a position for it. Have to speak to the judge about you," she added cattily.

"Whaddaya mean, speak to the judge? Do you know Ha--" He purposely halted before he spoke the judge's name, testing her.

"Hardcastle? Oh, yes, Mark, I know the judge as well as I know you."

"But you *don't* know me!" He gulped as he saw her grip on the .38 tighten at his raised voice. "I only meant," he went on hurriedly, "that I don't know you, so how can you know me?"

"Who really knows anyone?"

"Lady," he sighed, "I don't wanna sit here and talk semantics. I'm just trying to figure out what the hell's going on."

"Are you thirsty?" She scrounged in the backpack, coming up with a canteen.

"Lady..."

"Not thirsty, then?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I am."

"All right. Just a little." She held the canteen to his mouth, allowed one swallow, then pulled it away. "That's enough."

McCormick watched quietly as she sat back down, pulling the backpack close against her side. "Lady, uh, Miss? It looks like you're planning on staying here awhile."

"You're fishing again, Mark, and I'm starting to get tired of it."

McCormick clenched his teeth, the barely controlled hostility of her voice making him bite back all the things he wanted to say. Too soon to tell how far this woman could be pushed, and he sure wasn't about to light her fuse at *this* point. If only he could get some idea of what she was planning. Hardcastle would be home soon; there was no doubt she was aware of it, and he didn't want to imagine what might happen then.

"Come and get it, kiddo," Hardcastle yelled as he entered the kitchen carrying a large pizza. "McCormick!" he shouted again. "Chow down!"

Getting no response, he walked into the den, then sighed impatiently as he looked around the quiet, empty room. *Thought for sure he'd be sprawled out on the couch by now, watching my TV. Probably in the gatehouse with a headset growin' out of his ears. Wouldn't hear me yelling if I was standin' right in his face. Gonna scramble what's left of his brain listenin' to that stuff.*

Hardcastle started back outside, grumbling every step of the way. He realized, even as he did so, that most of it was put on. It was always fun to sneak up unexpectedly on McCormick; see how many feet in the air the kid'd jump when he was tapped on the back. Jumped real good when he was startled, did ol' McCormick, thought Hardcastle fondly, wondering if there were a Guinness record for such things.

"Not that I'm gonna have a chance to find out," he muttered a moment later as he glanced around the gatehouse. After searching the small area, he frowned in puzzlement. *Car's still here, and there wasn't a note on the refrigerator sayin' he'd gone off with somebody. He can't still be workin' on that garden. He checked his watch, verifying that he'd been gone for almost five hours. No way McCormick'd work that long. Unless he took about a three-hour nap in the middle of it. The judge smirked as he nodded his head. Now that sounds like the McCormick version of slave labor: a few hours work, interspersed with long naps and 'buy me a pizza'.*

"I'll plant you among the petunias, all right," he grumped as he walked

toward the side of the house where the new garden was being lain out. "Plant you head first. Nothin' be showin' but your dirty sneakers kickin' around in the air." He stopped suddenly, startled at the sight that greeted him. The azaleas and rhododendrons sat, lined up in their pots, waiting to be planted, while McCormick's shovel lay on the ground beside the one freshly planted bush. The same bush, Hardcastle realized, that they had been bickering over. Nothing had been done since he'd left--five hours ago.

Gnawing at his bottom lip, he considered the possibilities. McCormick wouldn't just walk off and leave things like this unless something had happened. He kneeled and searched the ground quickly, looking for any evidence of blood. The kid could've cut himself on some of the gardening tools. Not finding anything, he shook his head in annoyance. No, that didn't make any sense either, he thought. If he'd hurt himself, he would've either driven to the hospital or else made a mess getting to a phone to call someone for help. So where was he?

Hardcastle stood and turned in a slow circle, his eyes searching the grounds in the swiftly dimming light of sunset. Puzzlement soon turned to worry. This wasn't like McCormick at all. *Where the hell is he?!*

McCormick tensed when he heard Hardcastle's voice in the distance calling his name.

"Not a sound," warned his captor. Kneeling in front of him, their eyes locked, and she jammed the gun barrel uncomfortably into his stomach. "He'll never think to come down here unless you call out, and you *don't* want to do that."

McCormick glared at her, unable to control his expression. He could feel his heart pounding, and unable to stop it, he trembled, more in anger than in fear. She felt the tremble, too, he could tell by the gloating expression on her face, and suddenly, he loathed this woman. There was something about her that made his skin crawl, and he fought to control his revulsion.

Hardcastle's voice drifted away, and he watched her lips curl into a slow, sadistic smile.

"Very good, Mark." She settled down beside her backpack, folding her arms and continuing to smile up at him. "We wouldn't want the game to end this soon, now would we?"

McCormick's glare didn't waver. His anger at the feel of a gun barrel pressed into his gut had made him decide he didn't *want* to wait around and see how this woman could be pushed. "You want games, lady? If I ever get out of this chair, *I'll* give you games," he threatened.

"Oooh." Her mouth dropped open in obvious faked amazement. "So the cat *does* have claws. I was beginning to wonder."

McCormick cocked his head to one side. "Would you really have shot me if I'd yelled for the judge?"

"Of course."

"The noise would've brought him straight here."

"That's right."

"And...then you'd have shot him, too."

She favored him with a brief, harsh laugh. "You never stop fishing, do you, Mark? Well, I'll let you land this one. Why not? Yes, I would've shot him. Wouldn't take much pleasure in it *yet*, but yes, I would've shot him."

McCormick took a deep breath, the fear he'd been trying to keep in check now confirmed. It *was* both of them she wanted, for whatever her reasons. "What do you mean, 'yet'?"

She stared at him, face blank.

"You said you wouldn't take much pleasure in it...yet."

"I already explained that."

"You did?"

"He has to suffer, too," she said deviously. "Did you think I only meant you? Why on earth would you think that?"

McCormick shook his head. *This has to be a bad dream. She's talking in riddles, looking at me as if I were some kind of imbecile for not understanding.* Hoping for an answer he could halfway comprehend, he asked, "Why do you want us to suffer?"

"Because I'm suffering. Because you've made me suffer."

"Me...?" He hesitated, totally confused. "Lady--"

"--Maria!" she snapped. "Stop calling me lady. I don't like it. My name's Maria."

"All right." He searched his memory for *anyone* named Maria but drew a blank. Maybe Hardcastle? "All right...Maria. If...you're suffering, I'm sorry. But unless you tell me what this is all about, then I can't do anything. I don't like people to suffer, Maria. I've never purposely made anyone suffer in my life. Tell me what you think it is that I...that the judge and I...have done to you."

"No."

"No? That's it? Just 'no'?"

"Anybody ever tell you you talk too much?" she snapped.

"Everybody," he admitted.

"Well, not this time. Now you just shut up, or I'm gonna have to gag you. Understand?"

"Yeah." He squirmed, uncomfortable in the tight bonds. His stomach growled again, making its hunger known, and to his dismay, another bodily function made its presence felt. Shifting in the chair, he chastised himself for drinking two beers earlier that day.

"What's the matter? Why're you so squirmy all of a sudden?"

He looked down at her, fighting the embarrassment. "If you must know, lady--excuse me, *Maria*, I gotta pee."

She laughed, seeming to know how the sound grated on his nerves. "Okay, I can live with that, even thought of it already; that's why your hands are tied in front. Now, you listen to me real careful. I'm gonna untie you from this chair, but--" She pulled from her seemingly bottomless backpack a cord looped in a hangman's knot. "--this is going around your neck with me and the gun at the other end. And your feet are staying hobbled, so I'd advise you not to trip. Got it? You *can* find the bathroom?" she added sarcastically, nodding toward its open door less than six feet from where they sat.

"I don't *think* I'll get lost," he muttered, furious at the upcoming humiliation. "I guess I'd be wasting my breath to ask if I could close the door?"

"Don't get cute, Mark."

"I'm not getting 'cute'. I'm asking for a little privacy. Where the hell do you think I'd be going in a three-by-three-foot bathroom?!"

She shook her head. "Forget it. Just be grateful I'm letting you go at all. And by the way, don't think I'm doing it out of concern for your

comfort. I just don't want to have to sit here and smell you."

Seething, McCormick clenched his jaws as she slipped the noose around his neck. *This bitch, whatever her problem is, must get her kicks out of humiliation and suffering. There has to be a way to find out what she's got planned...before Hardcastle walks into her trap like I did.*

"I want you to put out an APB, Frank."

Hardcastle's voice was quiet, but he knew Harper was picking up on the underlying fear in the softly spoken words. At this point, he didn't much care.

"Okay, Milt. Just let me be sure I've got this straight. You left McCormick working in that fool garden of yours yesterday afternoon when you came over here...and you haven't seen him since, even though his car's still at the house."

"Right." Hardcastle frowned at the lieutenant's hesitation. "What's the problem?"

"Milt...don't you think it's just *possible* he could've gone off with an old girlfriend? Something like that? If *you* were bored just mucking around the house, then you *know* he sure as hell was."

"Come off it, Frank!" Hardcastle's fist landed on Harper's desk with the force of a pounding hammer. "You've known McCormick now for what, two years? So you know he pulls a lot of shit, as much as he can get away with, but not something like this."

"You can't be sure of that, Milt!" Harper's voice rose in volume to match Hardcastle's. "He hasn't been gone twenty-four hours. Look--" He walked around his desk and laid a hand on Hardcastle's shoulder. "--I'm not saying I won't put out the APB if that's what you really want; I'm just asking you to think about it for a minute. It *coulda* been an old girlfriend who came by, or an old buddy with some kind of sob story. You know McCormick's a sucker for stuff like that."

"I know that, Frank," Hardcastle said, pulling in the reins on his temper. "But give me a little credit, will ya? If McCormick had gone off with somebody...of his own free will...he would've called me by now. He'd know I'd be worried."

Harper studied him for a moment. "You already checked the hospitals?"

"Yeah. Nothing."

"City jail?"

"I've *checked*, Frank."

"Okay, then." Harper nodded. "You better stick around the house so we can get in touch with you. There haven't been any phone calls? Threats? Anything to indicate a kidnapping, something like that?"

"Nah. It crossed my mind; though why the hell anybody would wanna kidnap McCormick is beyond me. But there haven't been any calls. Hasn't been anything. He's just...gone."

Harper leaned on his desk, eyes cast down on piles of paperwork. "Then I'm guessing revenge has crossed your mind, too. Both of you have made a lot of enemies in the last couple of years."

"Now you're thinkin' like me, Frank. And we're wasting time," Hardcastle added icily. "Time McCormick might not have."

"Go home, Milt. I'll put out an APB, and we'll let you know as soon as we come up with something."

"You do that."

"Hey, Milt." Harper's voice stopped Hardcastle as his hand touched the doorknob. "If we find that kid shacked up with some bimbo, I'm gonna take it out of his hide."

"Only if you find any left when I'm through with him."

Hardcastle walked through the corridors of the police department, thinking back on his last statement. He wished like hell he could think that was all it was: McCormick with his 'hormones overruling brains' mentality shacked up somewhere with one of his ever popular blonde 'goddesses'. He wasn't going to be that lucky, though. Call it intuition, a former cop's instinct, or whatever. The label didn't matter. The kid might have pulled something like this in their early days together, but those days were too far in the past. No way was it a possibility now. He didn't know everything McCormick was capable of and he probably never would. You never knew everything about anyone. But he did know the one thing the kid was absolutely incapable of: intentionally hurting someone he cared about. McCormick would know how worried the judge was. He'd know he was causing pain. If there were any way to let him know where he was, McCormick would've found it.

Frustrated, Hardcastle glowered at everyone he passed in the hallway. Nothing to do but go home. Go home and wait. Milton Hardcastle had never been good at waiting.

Maria smiled at her heavy-lidded hostage as she popped another black beauty into her mouth and sipped from the canteen. She knew Max would disapprove, but he would surely understand given the circumstances. She couldn't risk falling asleep.

Her hostage, however, was having a more difficult time of it. As the second night approached, he'd dozed off several times, jerking himself awake only to have sleep fall upon him again despite his struggles.

"Hostage." She rolled the word across her tongue, liking the sound of it. "Hostage." The old man was probably going crazy by now if he cared anything at all about this kid. How she would love to creep up to the house and spy on him, but she didn't dare risk it. His turn would come, but for now...

"Hey, Maria."

She scowled at the weary sounding voice interrupting her pleasant thoughts. "What?"

"Nothin'."

"Nothing?" She laughed, enjoying his discomfort. "What's the matter, Mark? Hungry? Thirsty?"

"Both, and you know it."

She sighed impatiently as she rose to refill her canteen. Convenient that the old trailer still had its facilities hooked up; it was something she hadn't been sure of. "That's right, I do know it. You don't seem to understand yet, Mark. This isn't supposed to be pleasant; it's punishment." Tossing him an irritated glare, she finally decided enough time had passed, "One swallow." She held the canteen to his mouth for a brief second, then pulled it away. "I said *one* swallow."

"Is this what you've got planned then? You're just gonna sit here and watch me starve to death?"

"Oh, grow up, for God's sake!" She flopped down beside her backpack, shaking her head as she looked up at him. "It would take weeks for

you to starve, and I *am* giving you water. I'm not going to waste my breath trying to explain it to you again."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. You wanna see me suffer."

She smiled. He *was* beginning to understand. "There's so many ways to make a person suffer, you know? You're doing one kind, and I imagine Hardcastle's doing another. Don't you?" She watched him, trying to gauge his response. "By the way, just how close *are* you and Hardcastle?"

"You bitch."

The words were spoken so quietly she could just make them out, but even in the semi-darkness of the trailer's interior, she could see the hatred in the cold blue eyes.

Oh, struck a nerve, she thought gleefully. If this guy thought she could be intimidated by words and a look, though, he was sadly mistaken. "Whatsamatter, Mark, baby?" she crooned. "You don't think I should make the judge suffer? What is he to you, anyhow? Your sugardaddy?" She giggled at the look on his face. If looks could kill...

"You're sick."

Her giggle halted, replaced by a cold fury. "Don't...you...ever... say that to me!" she spat, jumping up to jerk his head back by the hair.

He didn't respond; merely continued to stare at her with a disgusted look.

Abruptly switching tactics, she released him and smiled. "You don't want Hardcastle to suffer, do you, Mark?"

"No."

"Then I should put an end to his suffering, shouldn't I?" She watched the alarm cross his face before he successfully hid it behind an emotionless mask.

"Depends on what you mean. Put an end to his suffering, how?"

"You *know* how, Mark." She picked up the .38 and kissed it, snickering at the look of dismay that sprang to his face. *This guy might as well give up playing it cool. He's tryin'. Gotta give him that, but his face is a dead giveaway. He cares for that ol' man. Good. I can use that.*

"You don't wanna do that, Maria," McCormick said. "You don't wanna kill Hardcastle."

"Oh? So now *you're* telling *me* what I want?"

He glared at her mutely, his eyes gleaming, delightful evidence of his frustration.

"You gonna cry? Huh, baby? You gonna cry if I kill your sugardaddy?" she taunted.

"No. But so help me, I'll kill you or die tryin'."

Hate dried the unshed tears as he pinned a daggered glare at her, and her anger grew. *Stupid bastards, both of them. Brought all this on themselves, and now aren't willing to suffer the consequences.* She took a deep breath and calmed herself. This was her game. She made the rules. "Okay, Mark. I won't kill him...yet. We'll go on like this for a little while more. Bet he's getting frantic, wondering where you are. You guys really care about each other, don't you? I can tell by the way you act. Oh, yeah," she smiled with delight at her tension-gripped hostage, "he's probably climbing the walls by now."

Hardcastle woke to the sound of Richard Simmons urging everyone to 'shake those boodies'. Turning off the television, he stood and tried to

stretch the kinks out.

Confused as to why he'd spent the night fully dressed on the couch, reality finally clicked with a sickening thud. McCormick. The phone had never rung, and he frowned at it as though the instrument were somehow at fault. It was a waste of time, he knew, but he picked up the receiver anyway, making sure there was a dial tone. No calls. No threats. No demands. Also, no word from Frank. And it was that very 'nothingness', Hardcastle knew, that was causing his stomach to knot. It was as if the kid had dropped off the face of the earth. One minute he was here, the next he was gone.

"But gone where, goddammit!" Hardcastle muttered as he crossed the room and looked out the window toward the gatehouse.

The sudden, irrational hope that the kid might have made it home, might be in the gatehouse right now, sprang into his mind. He pushed the thought away, refusing to let it take root and grow. Life was never that simple. It didn't give you happy endings just because you hoped for them. It was a lesson Hardcastle had learned the hard way. And one he'd prayed he'd never have to go through again. Now this.

He started for the kitchen but stopped short, knowing he had no appetite. Besides, he'd gotten out of the habit of eating breakfast alone. It no longer seemed natural.

"Oh, hell!" He turned and slammed out the door, heading for the gatehouse. Maybe he'd overlooked something, some clue, *anything*.

Ten minutes later he stood, staring unseeing into McCormick's fireplace. The rooms had yielded no clue as to their missing occupant's whereabouts, only a heartwrenching reminder of his absence: clothes and shoes scattered about with careless abandon; books, records, tapes covering every available surface.

The judge stacked some of the albums haphazardly, resisting the urge to grimace at some of the garish covers. It was so damned quiet, the stillness more deafening than any of McCormick's rock music had ever been. Hardcastle's hands tightened on the albums as his eyes traveled around the room. This small house had known more life, more laughter in the past two years than it had ever known in all its previous years of existence. It couldn't be over. The kid was somewhere, dammit, and he was alive. He didn't need any rationale for his certainty on that point. If McCormick were dead, he'd know it, would feel it somehow. His lips twitched in an almost smile as he thought of what Frank would say to a statement like that. Probably put in a call to the men in white coats. None of that mattered, though. There had to be an answer to all this, and he didn't feel like sitting around any longer waiting on a phone call that would probably never come.

Jaw set in determination, he walked out of the gatehouse without looking back. He was going to find McCormick if it took calling in every favor owed him for the last 30 years.

Entering the den, he scavaged about for the keys to the truck, cursing all the while. *Damn things must have legs, the way they're always disappearing.* "Hah!" He snatched them from between two sofa cushions and started for the door. He was almost there when the phone rang.

McCormick grimaced as he tried to flex his swollen fingers. His wrists were raw after being bound for nearly 48 hours, and he wondered vaguely why people assumed it was an advantage to have your hands tied

in front. There was no advantage unless you could use those hands in some way, and he sure hadn't had any opportunity. Whatever Maria was taking to keep herself awake, it was doing its job only too well.

Nervous, he watched her as she stood and peeked out a curtain. She was really starting to get jumpy, whether from the pills or just tension, he didn't know. Probably both. Didn't matter. She was going to do something soon, he could feel it in the air, an almost palpable presence.

Dammit! He twisted at the ropes, ignoring, as much as possible, the pain in his wrists and stiffened muscles. The eagle-eyed Maria had allowed no chance of escape on the few bathroom excursions he'd been allowed, and he *couldn't* get the ropes to loosen. *Whoever taught this bitch to tie a knot did one hell of a job.*

"What're you doing?!" She twisted around from the window.

"Nothing." He tried to clear his throat, knowing his response had come out a croak. "Nothing," he repeated.

"Better not be." She stood in front of him, bending over so their eyes were level. "You know better than to try anything. You don't look so good, Mark baby. What *would* the judge think if he could see you now?" She clucked mockingly in false sympathy.

He didn't bother to glare, having long since figured out she enjoyed his frustration.

"Not talking today?" She lifted his chin with her hand. "That's boring, Mark. You don't want me to get bored, do you?"

"What does it matter, what I want?"

"It doesn't. But then, I guess you've already learned that lesson."

"I'm tired, Maria," he said dully, feeling his tongue thick in his mouth. "I'm hungry. I'm thirsty. If I had the energy to be scared, I would be. What more do you want?"

"Oh, I want lots more, Mark; but we're getting there."

She caressed his cheek with her hand, and he resisted the urge to jerk back. Instead, he stared at her coldly, much as one might look at a particularly loathesome piece of garbage. Something vile and slimy that stood in one's path.

"What're you thinking?" She straightened, looking down at him. "What??"

He smirked dismissively, turning his head, averting his eyes, and refusing to face her.

The slap wasn't unexpected.

"Must've read my mind," he quipped, raising his eyebrows in an insolent manner as he met her stare.

"You ever look at me like that again, and I'll kill you," she said coldly.

"What you're gonna do anyway, isn't it?"

"Shut up! Just shut up!"

McCormick's eyes riveted on her as she stalked back to the window. *Damn! Wish my stomach'd quit crampin'. Never been so hungry in my life. Even Hardase's infamous liver and onions don't sound bad. His mouth tightened grimly. This is hardly the time to be worrying about eatin', though. Gotta keep her attention focused on me somehow. This going to the window over and over is new. Scares me. Whatever she's plannin', it looks like she's getting ready to include the judge,*

He swallowed. Wonder if Hardcastle's home? Christ, he must be going crazy! There's got to be an APB out by now, and the judge's trying to

figure all the angles, that's for sure. But he'll never think to check right on his own home ground. Never in a million years. Nobody in their right mind would ever pull a stunt like this. But we're not dealing with someone in their right mind...and Hardcastle's got no way of knowing that.

"Maria, can I have some water?" he asked, trying to distract her from the window.

"No."

"C'mon. A lousy drink of water."

"You look at me like I'm some kind of scum and then you ask me for water?" She eyed him and smiled. "Beg."

He sighed. *Mission accomplished...for the moment, anyway. Her thoughts are clearly back on making me as miserable as possible.* "Please, Maria. I'm so damn thirsty. Please...some water?"

"Is that the best you can do? What if I still say no?"

He closed his eyes, trying to ignore the gravelly feel of his throat and fighting the tears that threatened to well up. *I won't give that bitch the satisfaction...no matter what the cost.* "Please. I'm beggin'. That's what you want, isn't it? I'd get down on my knees if I could. Please, Maria. Just some water."

She chuckled and reached for the canteen, then laughed as she rationed the one pathetic swallow she always allowed. He would hear that evil laugh for years to come. There was no doubt of that. The only doubt at this point was whether he would live to see those years. Despair washed over him. *Dammit, Hardcase. Wherever you're at, whatever you're doin', make it fast. Don't know how much longer I can keep her from coming after you.*

Harper's phone call hadn't wasted time or words. "Get down here, Milt. I wanna see if you recognize a mugshot." He had rung off before Hardcastle could ask any questions, and the judge didn't like the feeling of foreboding that enveloped him now as he entered the lieutenant's office. The worried look on Harper's face did little to dispell his feeling of unease. "What've you got, Frank?"

"Not sure yet." Harper indicated the mugshot lying on his desk.

Hardcastle studied it, shrugged, and turned to Harper. "Who the hell is Maria Corazon?"

"Max Conroy's girlfriend."

Picking up the picture, Hardcastle shook his head. "I don't recognize her. Should I?"

"Word travels fast, Milt. You know how it is. Everybody knows McCormick's missing."

"Let's have it, Frank. Is this some of Conroy's work? Do you know where McCormick is?"

"I wish," Harper replied. "Conroy's a chicken shit, Milt; we both know that, and now he's trying to make a deal. Wait a minute--" He gestured impatiently as Hardcastle began to interrupt. "--Let me tell you what we might have here. Conroy heard about Mark disappearing, and he says his girlfriend's probably behind it."

"Oh, and he had *nothing* to do with it!" Hardcastle exploded.

"Will you *listen*?! Dammit, Milt, Conroy says she's crazy, a real looney tune. Been in and out of Camarillo more times than he can count. Says she doesn't mean shit to him, but he kept her around 'cause she's a looker and a good lay."

"That sounds like Conroy all right, but what's this got to do with McCormick?"

"That's what I'm *trying* to tell you. Conroy says he talked to her last week. She was talking crazy, real off the wall stuff. About how she loved him and how she was gonna get revenge. He figures she somehow got to McCormick."

"So where is she?"

"If we knew that, we'd probably know where McCormick is," Harper returned in a testy tone. "She hasn't been seen around her apartment building for several days."

"Then she's got him somewhere else."

"Maybe."

"What is it you're not telling me, Frank?"

"Her car's in impound, towed in yesterday. It was abandoned in a parking lot less than two miles from your place."

Hardcastle frowned, confused. "I don't get it. She somehow snatches McCormick, and then they only go two miles? That's crazy, Frank."

"Exactly."

Hardcastle felt the word, with all its meaning, sink in. "We're talking 'crazy' for real, aren't we?"

"According to Conroy, yeah."

"You really don't think he's behind this."

Harper shrugged, running a hand through his thinning hair. "It's possible, but I don't think so, Milt. He's trying to deal, but it's like he's running scared, you know? He's already got enough hanging over his head without adding...kidnapping to it."

"You weren't going to say kidnapping, were you, Frank?" he asked quietly.

"I've got men checking all the motels in the area." Harper avoided the question. "And I'm gonna be sending two uniforms out to your place, keep an eye on things until we find her."

"Her, Frank? Not *them*?" He looked long and hard at his long-time friend. "No phone calls. No contact. You don't think she's holding him in some motel room any more than I do."

"We gotta check it out, Milt. At least we're finally doing something."

"And while you're doing that, I've got some checking of my own kind to do." Hardcastle slammed a fist into his palm, unable to contain the anger any longer. "I shouldn't have waited. 'By-the-book' Hardcastle. I remember telling McCormick once--" He almost smiled at the memory. "--that Lady Justice was a tough old broad, fair, but not always fast. Shoulda paid more attention to my own words."

"Milt, I know how you're feeling--"

"--No! You don't. You can't even begin to know." He glared at Harper, knowing he was being unfair but unable to help it. "You don't know," he repeated, almost to himself.

"I'll tell you what I do know. You're not blowin' outta here taking the law in your own hands. Not even you, Milt."

Hardcastle looked at the lieutenant, hearing a hardness in his tone that matched his own. Harper was a cop. A damn good one. He knew his priorities. He nodded then, decision made, praying that it was the right one. "Twenty-four hours, Frank. So find him fast, and find him alive. I won't interfere. But if you find him...dead..." He started for the door, stopped and looked back. "And don't bother with the bodyguards, Frank; I won't be needin' 'em."

"If it's her, you'll be next on her list."
"Yeah, but I've seen her picture. I know what to look for. McCormick didn't."

"Milt..."

"No!"

"I don't wanna lose *two* friends," Harper said pointedly.
Hardcastle looked at the floor for a moment before looking back at Harper. "Let's hope you haven't lost any. Not yet."

She was talking to herself, over by the window.

McCormick tried to shake off his grogginess. How long had he slept, he wondered as he watched her. In fact, how had he managed to sleep at all, in the uncomfortable, upright position. He'd lost all sense of time, and even the hunger pains had stopped; food didn't seem that important any longer. "Who're you jabberin' to?" he mumbled.

"What's it to you?" she snarled, coming over to stand in front of him. "Oooh, you're looking bad, Marky baby."

"How long's it been?"

"Since I brought you here?"

He nodded.

"Three days. Whatsamatter, sugar, aren't you having any fun?"

He sighed, not bothering to answer.

"I asked you a question," she barked and snapped her fingers irritatingly in front of his face. "Hey, I think it's time we livened up this game, don't you? Answer me, dammit!"

"Thirsty."

"So *be* thirsty; I don't care. Doesn't matter any more, anyway."

McCormick was tired, too tired. His body ached, cramped, but his mind snapped to alertness at her words. He belatedly realized that he should have noticed the difference at once. Her speech was no longer a taunting drawl, instead words seemed to spit out of her mouth in an almost involuntary rapid fire. Her hands shook.

He raised his eyes, looked into her face, and almost wished he hadn't. It might be all the pills she'd been taking, or it might just be her flipping out, but there was a maniacal gleam in her eyes, and she was smiling in what seemed to be an uncontrollable manner. "Why doesn't it matter any more?" he rasped through his parched throat. "You gonna kill me now?"

She laughed then, that damnable laugh. He could feel his heart thudding, and he looked down at his chest, feeling a faint surprise that the furious pounding wasn't visible through his shirt. *Oh, damn. What a lousy way to die. And I don't even know why.*

"I'm not going to kill you yet, Mark," she said, breaking into his thoughts.

He looked at her again, dumbfounded. "What?"

"No, no." She kneeled in front of him, the gun propped on her knee, and began to explain as one would do to a somewhat backward child. "Now is when the fun really begins. See, here's what I do. First, I go up to the house and I see Judge Hardcastle. I'm gonna *tell* him that I've killed you. Think I'll get a big reaction to that?" Her words were giggly, sending chills up his spine.

"He'll kill you."

"No, he won't. I guess I forgot to mention, I'm going to be holding a

gun on him. Then, after I get a...satisfactory reaction to my news, I'm gonna kill *him*."

"You can't," McCormick said quietly, trying to remain calm. He *had* to get through to her on *some* level. "This isn't make-believe, Maria. You won't be able to do it."

"Yes, I will. Once I've had the fun of seeing him squirm, seen the misery in his eyes, I kill him; then, I come back here, tell you what I've done in *graphic* detail, and have the same satisfaction of seeing you miserable before I kill you. The perfect revenge. You not only both die, but you each get to know that the other is lost, too. You see? It's *so* perfect."

"It's not perfect, it's sick. You're sick, Maria."

She tangled a hand in his hair and, as before, jerked his head back. "I told you not to say things like that."

McCormick watched the sparkle in her eyes with an almost detached, fatalistic air. Despite his pounding heart and the accompanying adrenaline rush, he knew that a part of him, the hard, realistic core, was accepting his fate. The cavalry couldn't always arrive in time. The Lone Ranger and Tonto weren't going to be riding off into the sunset together. It was a nice dream. For a while it had been a nice reality. Now it seemed like it was over but for one last thing. Tonto was the watchdog; it was his job to save the masked-man's hide. If it meant sacrificing his own in the bargain...he was gonna die, anyway. She'd made that clear, and after listening to her well-thought-out, but oh-so-sick plan, he didn't doubt for a minute she meant it. And could carry it off.

He fixed her with an intense glare, and she released her grip on his hair. "You're not going to do it," he said.

She seemed to see the challenge in his face and backed away. "You can't stop me."

"Oh? Can't I?" He smiled at her, perversely enjoying the confusion on her face. "JUUUUUDDGGGE!!!"

Yelling at the top of his lungs, he was certain she would shoot, that the noise would alert Hardcastle, that *one* of them, at least, would survive this madwoman. But she didn't shoot. He never had time to register his shocked surprise as the gun whipped across his face.

Unease gnawed at Hardcastle's stomach, and he paced, trying to piece together what was happening. Something besides McCormick was missing. Some bit of information, some clue they'd overlooked. He refused to dwell on the obvious. That she had taken the kid somewhere, killed him, and then come back and dumped the car. It just didn't make sense. *Why* would she leave that car? No, something was still missing.

He regretted his promise to Frank. The thought caused a stinging sensation in his eyes, and he blinked rapidly, bringing the threatened dampness under control. Tears were for the dead, and McCormick wasn't. Not yet. No matter what Frank thought. He'd said 24 hours; if Frank's people hadn't found the kid by then...

Hardcastle lowered himself into a chair, noticing without much surprise his hands balled up into tightly clenched fists. It took every ounce of his willpower to fight the urge to begin his search immediately. If he started calling in favors to get information on the Corazon woman, it was bound to be tainted evidence. It would never stand up in court. But if he didn't, if he waited, and it turned out 24 hours *had* made the difference

between finding the kid alive or finding him dead...he couldn't *live* with that. Hardcastle raised his head and exhaled deeply, his eyes falling upon his wife's photo on the mantle. He'd had no chance to prevent Nancy's death, nor before that, his son's. But this time it was different. There might be a chance, and God forgive him, but the oath of allegiance to the law he had sworn to uphold paled in comparison.

He jumped, startled by a sudden knock on the door. Hastening across the room, he could feel his heart racing. Maybe Frank had found something...

He knew the gravity of his mistake the instant the door opened.

She was standing there, shaking as though palsied, and the gun, clutched firmly in two hands, was pointed straight at him.

"Aren't you going to invite me in, Judge?"

He stepped back as she advanced into the foyer. "Where's McCormick?" "Who?"

He tried to keep his voice calm as he took in her dishevelled appearance, the unnatural gleam in her eyes and the way her mouth kept curving upward, only to tighten, then curve into another smile. "Mark McCormick. The guy you kidnapped from here three days ago."

"Ohh...Mark. Yeah."

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"WHERE IS HE?!"

"Juuddge...such concern."

Hardcastle tried to control his mounting rage as he stared into her gloating face. It wasn't easy to do. "Listen, Miss Corazon..." At the surprised look she gave him, he nodded. "Oh, yeah, we know who you are. We've been looking for you."

"Couldn't have looked very hard." She grinned, breaking into a barking laugh. "He was so disappointed, Judge. He really thought you'd try harder to find him."

"What're you talking about? What've you done with McCormick? Where is he?"

"He's right where he's been all along, Judge, right under your nose."

Hardcastle stared as she laughed maniacally. *What in the hell is the woman talking about?* He let his glance fall to the gun. *No, there's no way I can grab it from her. Not till I know where the kid is.* "I don't understand," he said, shaking his head, exaggerating his puzzlement, playing 'the old man'.

"We've been right here all along, you old fool! Down in the gardener's trailer."

He froze in stunned sickness as the missing piece fell into place. She hadn't *taken* McCormick anywhere. Right under his nose!

"He kept thinking you'd surely find him," she taunted. "Poor baby was so miserable, Judge. So hungry. And thirsty."

"Where is he now? Still in the gardener's trailer?" Hardcastle tried to ask the question calmly, fighting off the angry bile that threatened to rise in his throat.

"You could say that."

"He is, or he isn't. Now, which is it?"

"You're not near as much fun as Mark was," she pouted. "Guess you don't care so much about him as he did about you."

"If you're gonna kill me," he said slowly, "then go ahead and pull the trigger now. Otherwise, I'm walking out of here and going straight to that trailer."

She backed up several steps, her eyes gleaming wildly, and grinned. "Won't do you any good. You're too late."

Hardcastle tried to make sense of her words over the roar filling his head.

"I got what I wanted from him. Besides, he was startin' to get on my nerves. 'Oh, please, Maria, I'm so thirsty'," she mimicked. "He begged real good, Judge, and believe me, I had him begging."

"You said...too late."

"I killed him," she stated bluntly. "Just a few minutes ago. Right before I came up and knocked on your door."

Hardcastle closed his eyes, not wanting, refusing, to believe her. He opened them again; indicated her gun. "You haven't killed him. I'd have heard the shot."

"Judge, Judge, Judge," she clucked reprovingly, "I never said I shot him. I do have some sense, you know. Of course you'd have heard a gunshot. But you wouldn't hear a knife, would you? A sharp, gleaming butcher knife? You ever seen anyone gutted before, Judge?"

Hardcastle lunged without thought, driven by pure animal rage. The roar of the gun barely registered in his mind, but the pain and the impact threw him back and down onto the floor. He could hear her hysterical laugh as she ran off.

The trailer. McCormick and...a knife. She has to be lying. She has to. I gotta know. Got to get to the trailer...find out.

Hardcastle knew, even as he struggled to his feet, he'd never make the distance. He'd caught her off-balance, but the blood was pouring from the wound in his shoulder. He leaned against the wall, eyes focusing on the telephone. Frank. Frank could 'find Mark fast...and alive'. If it wasn't too late. If the gardener's trailer hadn't become a bloody, nightmarish coffin. Hardcastle stumbled forward, ignoring his pain. He didn't stop until he had the phone in his hand.

McCormick was slowly regaining consciousness when Maria burst into the trailer. With a savage jerk, his head was yanked back, and he grimaced at the throbbing pain.

"Did you hear it, baby? Did you hear the shot?"

"What shot?" he mumbled in a fog.

"Hardcastle, you idiot! I told you I was going to shoot him, and that's just what I did."

She was jumping around the trailer's small interior, waving the gun wildly in a macabre victory dance.

McCormick shuddered, ignoring the blood running from his temple down the side of his face. She couldn't be telling the truth. Hardcastle couldn't die so easily. It was obscene. "I don't...believe you."

"Oh, you can believe it, baby." She danced over to where he sat, fanned the gun under his nose, then pressed it against his cheek. "You can smell it, can't you? Maybe it still feels warm?"

His thoughts whipped about incoherently. *Is she lying? She's capable. Yet there's a...a note of triumph in her voice. Is this how it's all meant to end? At the hands of a female lunatic?* He was scarcely aware of the tears that dripped down onto his shirt, mingling freely with the blood. They didn't matter. *If it's true...* "Why?" he whispered hoarsely, not looking at her. "Why?!"

She caressed his cheek with the gun much as she had done on the first day, this time drawing a pattern in the blood and tear mixture. "Poor Mark." She sighed dramatically. "You know, it's a beautiful day outside, it really is. It's a shame you never got to finish planting all those pretty flowers." She knelt in front of him, tilting her head to one side in a maddening mock. "I'm sure there will be lots of pretty flowers at your funerals, though. Gives a whole new meaning to the phrase 'The Rites of Spring', doesn't it?"

He looked at her, and his insides turned to ice. Her taunting face was only inches away, and he spat, with all his force, directly into it.

Screeching, she jumped to her feet, wiping at the saliva as though it were acid. "You bastard! You filthy bastard! Shooting's too good for you!" She stalked about the room making angry guttural noises.

His eyes bored into her with unblinking hatred. He wasted no energy trying to loosen his bindings. He'd tried too many times; it couldn't be done. With a sense of irony, he realized he wasn't really even scared any more. It was probably shock. Oh, he wasn't laughing in the face of death; he wasn't *that* far gone, it was just... He smiled faintly, almost forgetting her presence. *You gonna be there waitin' on me, Hardcase? You better be.*

"What the hell are you smiling at?!" she yelled.

He gave her an almost patient look. "Nothing," he said slowly, "that a person like you could ever hope to understand."

"Well, I understand this much, you bastard. You're gonna die, and you're gonna die slow." She ran into the trailer's back room, returning with an armload of musty smelling sheets, one of the few bits of evidence that the trailer had ever known occupancy. She flapped them out, lying them in a loose circle around the chair that held McCormick, pulling the edges in toward his feet.

His throat jerked in spasms as he saw her pull a book of matches from her backpack. *Oh, not like this. Please, God.* The thought skittered through his mind. She smiled up at him. God didn't seem to be listening much these days.

She lit a match, watched the flickering flame for a moment, then blew it out. "I wonder which you'll die of," she said, as though the question were worthy of academic pondering, "the smoke or the fire itself? Of course, you'll burn to a crisp, but still, it's not fair that I'll never actually know. Oh, well."

"Can't win 'em all, huh?" *Can't believe I said that!* The bubble of hysteria was quickly building inside him, an almost physical thing. *This can't be real, none of it. It's just too...bizarre. Another minute, and I'll be laughing...hysterically.*

She lit another match. Stood and dropped it onto the dry, moldy sheets. Then yet another. And another. Turning quickly, she scooped up the backpack and headed for the door.

"Maria!"

He saw her turn and look back at him as the flames gathered momentum, inching their way closer to his feet, the foul smelling smoke beginning to fill the air in the small enclosure. Frantic, McCormick tossed his head. "May... you...rot...in...hell...for...all...eternity." He'd never wished condemnation on another living soul, but he didn't regret it now.

She smiled enigmatically, then walked out the door, closing it firmly behind her.

Harper had been at his desk when the call came. The judge's pain-choked voice on the other end of the line had sent him flying out of his office at breakneck speed. Ordering his men to enter with no sirens, he wasn't the least bit surprised to find Hardcastle making his way toward the woods, a towel clutched inside his shirt to try and stop the bleeding.

They spotted the Corazon woman coming through the trees. The next instant she saw them, and time stood still. She stared at Hardcastle in disbelief, and he stiffened, his eyes becoming hard, icy steel, matching the expression on his face.

Harper watched, his gun fixed on her as she slung her backpack around. If what Hardcastle had said was true, he hoped she'd go for her gun, give him an excuse.

But she didn't. Her head was darting back and forth like a trapped animal's. The police advanced from all sides, and she fell to her knees screaming, pounding the ground, much as a child who had been deprived of a prize toy.

Harper indicated for his men to move in and turned his attention back to Hardcastle. Neither of them spoke. The judge's message replayed in Harper's memory. *"She's here. Shot me. Down in the gardener's trailer. She's killed McCormick."* What the hell do I say to him? "Milt," he finally said, knowing he was wasting his breath, "you better sit down. The ambulance will be here any second." His voice was none too steady, and he knew it. *Damn! I liked the kid, too.*

"Get me to the trailer, Frank."

"Milt..."

"Get me to the trailer."

"My men will..."

"Frank!!!"

"Okay!" Harper nodded his head, one quick decisive movement. *No point wastin' Milt's strength with a stupid argument. Not now. But what did she do to McCormick? What are we walking into?"*

"She knifed him," Hardcastle said quietly, answering his unspoken question.

Harper set his mouth firmly as he pulled Hardcastle's good arm over his shoulder, and they began to walk to the trailer. *This is going to be rough on me, but God, it's gonna kill Milt.* "Shut her up!" he yelled as they passed by where Corazon was being handcuffed, still screaming and cursing at the top of her lungs.

"Too late, too late, too late!" she yelled, trying to kick out at Hardcastle.

"Hey, Lieutenant," said one of the young uniformed policemen, "do you smell smoke?"

"Huh?" Harper looked around, sniffing the air.

"Heeee's buuurrning," Corazon drawled slowly and sadistically.

"Frank...!" Hardcastle's voice was sharp, horrified.

Harper followed the judge's gaze. He could just make out the trailer through the trees in the distance...and the smoke beginning to pour from it. "Aaah, shit!" he groaned, taking off at a run. *Isn't killing McCormick enough?! Does she have to burn him up, too?!* He could hear the others running far behind him, but he didn't wait. He had to get McCormick out of there before he burned. *Milt's already going through hell; but this is just too damned much.*

Reaching the trailer, he flung open the door and tried to peer through

as smoke came billowing out. *Where's McCormick?* He froze, heart lurching at a faint coughing, choking sound off to his right. "Mark!"

The smoke strangled his yell, but he heard the cough again and threw himself in its direction. McCormick was lying on his back, and he landed almost on top of him. He tried to lift the prone figure, but something was holding it down. Frantically, he felt along the cough-spasming body. Ropes...and a tilted over chair. Grabbing the ever-present Swiss knife in his pocket, he cut at the ropes, hoping he wasn't cutting the kid in the process. Teary eyes and heavy smoke made it impossible for him to see, and there wasn't time to be careful. Noises came from outside, a chorus of his men's voices, topped by the sound of Hardcastle bellowing his name. Grabbing McCormick in his arms, he ducked past the encroaching flames and stumbled out the door.

Hardcastle, pale and waxen, stood waiting, still clutching his shoulder. Harper looked up at him, wanting to say "He's alive" but unable to stop coughing long enough to get the words out. He didn't need to. As he moved to lay McCormick down, the younger man coughed, jerking in his arms in an oxygen-deprived spasm.

Hardcastle reached out with his good arm, touching McCormick's face as if to be sure he hadn't imagined the movement, and Harper felt McCormick's head turn in the direction of the touch, as if he somehow knew it was the judge.

Harper had no trouble reading the judge's eyes as they turned to meet his. No words were necessary. Between friends, they seldom were.

Hardcastle nodded his approval as McCormick flushed the hospital food down the toilet. The burger melt the kid had snuck in under his jacket was much tastier than the cafeteria glue they'd brought him to eat.

"So, they're gonna let you go home tomorrow, Milt?" Harper asked from his comfortable sprawl in the chair at Hardcastle's bedside.

"Yeah. Ridiculous keeping me in here four days for a piddling shoulder wound."

"Don't get him started, Frank," advised McCormick, coming back into the room and flopping down on the foot of the judge's bed. "He wanted to go home as soon as they dug the bullet out, woulda been walkin' out the door while they were still putting the stitches in, if he'd had his way."

"You got no room to talk," growled Hardcastle, pointing a finger at McCormick. "You oughta still be in here yourself."

"Judge, I'm fine. I keep tellin' ya. I was just plain lucky to be able to throw myself back far enough to keep the fire from reaching me...well, much, anyway. And Frank got me out before the smoke had time to do any real damage."

"Oh, excuse me. Smoke-filled lungs, first degree burns on the bottom of your legs, rope burns so deep they'll probably leave scars and no food for three days. But you didn't have any *real* damage."

McCormick sighed and stared at the ceiling as if appealing for assistance, then turned and smiled at the judge. "The only *real* damage is gonna come when you see the grocery bill." He shrugged, rubbing his stomach. "I had three days to make up for."

Now it was Hardcastle's turn to appeal to the ceiling. "Get offa my foot, McCormick," he grumbled. "Go away."

"You know you don't mean that," said McCormick, smiling.

"I know." Hardcastle frowned as the sound of Harper's laughter interrupted his grouching. "What're you laughing at?"

"You two. It's nice to have things back to, uh, semi-normal."

Hardcastle snorted, finishing up his burger melt as he watched McCormick turn his grin toward Harper. Semi-normal was as close as he could ever hope to get as long as this crazy kid was around. As close as he wanted to get if it came down to that. "We owe you, Frank," he said, suddenly serious. "More than we'll ever be able to repay."

"Definitely," added McCormick.

"Hey, c'mon! I was just doing my job. Speaking of which, you both might like to know, our Miss Corazon is back in Camarillo."

"Good!" muttered McCormick.

Hardcastle agreed fervently, but he didn't want to talk about it now, not while those three days of hell were still so fresh. "You changed the subject real good, Frank."

"Huh?"

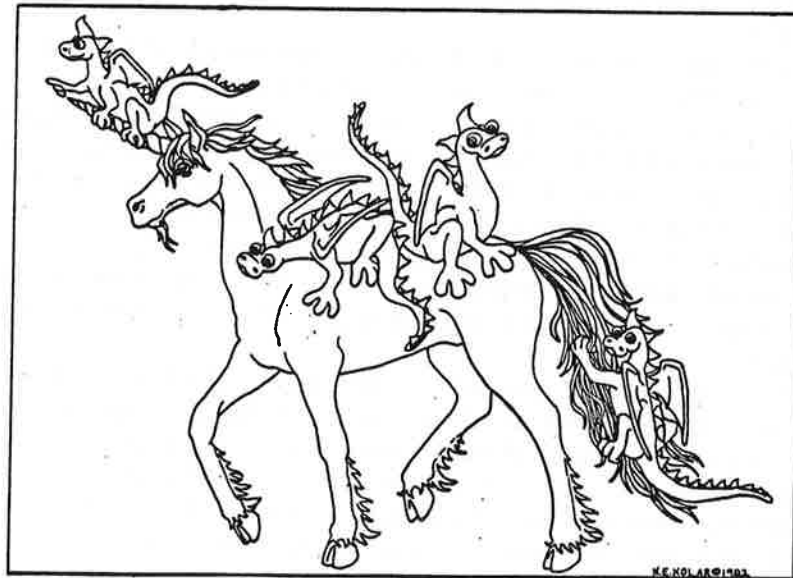
"Here we are tryin' to thank you for being a hero, and you won't even let us," Hardcastle said, grinning.

"Okay, that's it. If you're gonna start talking mush, I'm leaving." Harper half-rose from his chair only to be shoved back, not ungently, by McCormick, a broad smile lighting the younger man's face. He sat, a faint blush working its way up his face, and glanced from one to the other. Finally, he 'harrumphed'--a perfect imitation of the judge.

Hardcastle laughed. At Harper's endearing embarrassment. At McCormick for...what the hell...just for being so endearingly McCormick.

God, but it felt good to laugh.

H&Mc



Along For The Ride